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Length, in inches, of the pygmy shrew, the smallest mammal in Montana.

Wade anglers urged to step up to help reduce spread of AIS

Attention wade anglers: You might be transporting aquatic invasive species (AIS) on your boots or waders when moving from one river or lake to another.

Each year FWP checks thousands of boats, kayaks, and other watercraft at mandatory AIS check stations. But wade anglers aren't required to submit their gear for inspection. "That means it's up to wade anglers themselves to clean, drain, and dry their boots and waders before fishing someplace else," says Tom Woolf, chief of the FWP AIS Bureau.

Woolf notes that invasive mussel larvae, fragments of Eurasian water-milfoil, and fish pathogens can lodge in wader and boot crevices. "Get in there with a brush and clean out all the mud and vegetation you can find," he says. ■



This past winter, crews used baited cage traps to capture elk in HD 121. The animals were immobilized and then fitted with GPS collars for tracking.

ELK RESEARCH

New multi-year study aims to solve Lower Clark Fork elk mystery

No one knows why elk numbers in the lower Clark Fork River area have declined over the past two decades. Some think it's due to the growing number of wolves, which add to existing predation by black bears and mountain lions. But the cause could instead be elk habitat declines, disease, weather, or some combination of these factors.

Dr. Kelly Proffitt aims to find out.

Proffitt, an FWP senior research scientist, is leading a multi-year study that kicked off this past winter with the capture of 62 elk in Hunting District 121. The heavily forested district extends northwest of Thompson Falls on either side of the Clark Fork River through the Lolo and Kootenai national forests to the Idaho border. "Our goal is to figure out what is influencing the elk populations there," she says.

Proffitt, other FWP wildlife biologists, and researchers at the University of Montana W.A. Franke College of Forestry and Conservation aim to learn about

- ▶ pregnancy, recruitment, and survival rates;
- ▶ how elk interact with wolves, bears, and lions;
- ▶ where elk move throughout the year on public and private land;
- ▶ the types of habitats elk need most; and
- ▶ how land-use practices such as logging could be adjusted to benefit elk.

"The idea is to better understand elk popu-

lation dynamics by studying top-down influences like predation and bottom-up influences like habitat," Proffitt says.

Neil Anderson, FWP regional wildlife manager in Kalispell, says the information Proffitt and her team gather will be used to develop more effective elk hunting regulations, improve habitat, and take other management actions. "It will also help us collaborate with the U.S. Forest Service on forestry practices that benefit elk and other wildlife," he says.

From December through February this past winter, crews captured and GPS-collared 47 adult females, 7 adult males, and 8 calves. Cow elk were also fitted with implants that detect when and where calves are born so biologists can also capture and collar the young animals and then track survival and mortality rates.

Crews also captured and collared three female mountain lions in the study area. The lions were fitted with satellite-linked GPS collars that record locations every four hours for three years. Researchers also hope to capture seven additional mountain lions, ten black bears, and five wolves to monitor their locations. "This will help us evaluate large carnivore population numbers and identify different causes of elk mortalities," Proffitt says.

Follow the Clark Fork elk project's progress at fwp.mt.gov/aboutfwp/regions/region1. ■

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MIKE MORAN ILLUSTRATION; DILLON TABISH/MONTANA FWP; SHUTTERSTOCK

CHRIS BOYER/KESTRA AERIAL.COM

ACCESS ACQUISITION

Partnerships yield Yellowstone River island access sites

With the help of conservation groups and real estate professionals, FWP recently purchased two Yellowstone River island parcels upstream of the existing Indian Fort Fishing Access Site (FAS) near Reed Point, halfway between Bozeman and Billings. The parcels, totaling 107 acres, will remain undeveloped to provide wildlife habitat and rustic recreation such as fishing, camping, and bird watching while retaining the river's wild character.

"The islands are in a reach of the Yellowstone that we consider high priority for additional public access," says Mike Ruggles, FWP regional supervisor in Billings.

The department purchased the land using state natural resource restoration settlement funds from the state's successful lawsuit against ExxonMobil over the company's 2011 oil spill into the Yellowstone River. The funds are administered by the Montana Natural Resource Damage Program (NRDP).

To prevent the parcels being sold to private developers before the state could act on a purchase, the conservation real estate firm Beartooth Group, working with Trout Unlimited and Montana Freshwater Partners, first bought the properties and later sold them to the state. "Through partnerships across like-minded conservation groups and working closely with state agencies, we were able to ensure the protection of this critical habitat for wildlife along with new public



The new island parcels near Reed Point, totaling 107 acres, are now open to public access.

access," says Robert Keith, Beartooth Group founder and managing principal.

The public now has full access to the properties.

The new acquisitions enlarge the Indian Fort FAS and add to a system of other nearby access areas, including Bratten FAS, 4 miles upstream, and Cottonwood Island FAS,

6 miles downstream, purchased in 2021 from the Montana Department of Transportation using NRDP funds. "Left undeveloped, these acquisitions provide public access to primitive recreational opportunities, maintain natural river function, and preserve aquatic and terrestrial habitats," says Ruggles. ■

FISHING RECREATION

Find 330-plus spots to fish

Anglers new to Montana and even longtime residents are always looking for accessible places to fish for trout, walleye, and other popular species. The most convenient spots are FWP fishing access sites (FAS). The department manages more than 330 of these sites on streams, rivers, reservoirs, and lakes across the state.



Fishing access sites often feature boat ramps and usually provide shore fishing opportunities. Find the sites on the FISHMT

app, available for Apple or Android products. Or visit the FWP website homepage, click on FISH, then EXPLORE.

The app brings up a state map where you can zoom in to see FAS locations, indicated by a brown fish with a brown border. Click on an icon and FISHMT shows a photo of the site and contact information, directions, restrictions, fish species available, stocking records (if the water is stocked), and camping and other recreational opportunities. ■

GUTSY DECISION

Q. When I clean a fish, can I toss the entrails in the water?

A. Yes, but it's best to clean the fish on shore and then take the entrails in a boat out to sink in deep water so they don't wash up and stink up the shoreline. Note that you must keep the head, skin, fins, and tail attached to all harvested fish so a game warden can identify and count the species. Never leave entrails in or around a campsite or on the shoreline.

